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UNCLAS KINSHASA 002010

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SUBJECT: UNHCR BEGINS REPATRIATION OF CONGOLESE FROM CAR

REF: KINSHASA 1845

1. (U) Summary. UNHCR began repatriation of Congolese refugees to Libenge, Equateur Province, with a ceremony on October 20th. The refugee agency expects to repatriate approximately 10,000 people to Equateur by the end of 2004. Minister of Interior Theophile Mbemba headed a GDRC delegation to the Libenge ceremony during which he stated the government's intention to welcome and assist the refugees. End Summary.

UNHCR Starts Repatriation to Stable Area of DRC

2. (U) UNHCR officials held a ceremony in Libenge, Equateur Province, October 20 to launch the repatriation of Congolese refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) back to Equateur Province. The tripartite agreement which the DRC and CAR signed on August 26, 2004 has allowed UNHCR to start the repatriation process. UNHCR expects to assist approximately 10,000 refugees to return from CAR to Equateur, over 1,000 of whom will be returning to Libenge. UNHCR's goal is to repatriate all of these refugees by the end of the year.

3. (U) UNHCR opened an office in Libenge to assist returning Congolese refugees with humanitarian needs. A group of about 50 refugees who arrived in Libenge in time for the ceremony received blankets, cooking utensils, and food from UN staff. Representatives of UNICEF, UNDP and WFP were also present in Libenge to coordinate refugee assistance.

4. (SBU) According to UNHCR officials, it is important to start repatriation of refugees to Equateur Province, an area of the DRC which has enjoyed greater stability than the east. Although Equateur has a poor infrastructure and a difficult humanitarian situation, security for civilians has improved significantly with the departure a substantial number of Congo Liberation Movement's (MLC) troops to the east (reftel).

GDRC Minister of Interior Received Warmly

5. (U) Interior Minister Theophile Mbemba Fundu headed a GDRC delegation which included provincial officials. Mbemba was received warmly in Libenge, an isolated border town without electricity. The airport runway where the delegation landed was in fact only cleared of vegetation a few days before. (Note: Mbemba was the senior GDRC official to visit the area in many years. End Note.) In a speech to the Libenge community, Mbemba promised that the government would welcome returning refugees and help them reintegrate into their communities.

Comment

6. (SBU) Despite the fact that Libenge and other areas of Northern Equateur face a difficult humanitarian situation, UNHCR's decision to begin repatriation of refugees is consistent with its mandate of assisting refugees to return to areas where their physical integrity will not be at risk. In addition, socio-economic conditions in this part of the DRC are probably no worse than those on the CAR side. The security situation in Equateur is stable and there is no evidence of any armed groups operating in the province, and civilians can travel and engage in agricultural activities without significant problems. UNHCR and other UN agencies and NGOs can ameliorate hardship conditions by coordinating humanitarian assistance to refugees and local communities in areas of return like Libenge.

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